
TUITION OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS (TOPS)

FINDING: Remedial courses required by a higher education institution and repeated/deleted courses are considered in the accumulation of college credit hours to maintain a TOPS award.

OPTION 1: Discontinue inclusion of remedial courses and repeated/deleted courses in the accumulation of college credit hours necessary to maintain a TOPS award.

Description And Background: A TOPS student must earn a total of at least 24 college credit hours as determined by totaling the earned hours reported by the institution for each semester or quarter in the academic year. If a TOPS student is required by the attending institution to fulfill remedial course work, the remedial course work is included in the total of earned hours reported by the institution. A repeat/deleted course is included in the requirement to complete 24 hours per academic year if the college policy is to give academic credit for the repeated course.

Estimated Fiscal Impact: The Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) collects a social security number, number of earned hours and the cumulative grade point average from colleges and universities to determine if a student is eligible to continue receiving a TOPS award. OSFA stated that the remedial and repeat/delete cases were a small percentage of TOPS awards, and would decrease, as the requirements to receive a TOPS award become more difficult. For example, beginning in 2002-03 the high school minimum cumulative GPA will be calculated by using only the grades obtained in completing the core curriculum requirements established pursuant to law.

Action Required To Implement: Legislation is needed to discontinue the inclusion of remedial and repeated/deleted courses in determining continuing eligibility for a TOPS award.

FINDING: Sixty-one percent of students who forfeited TOPS awards for failure to maintain the minimum college GPA or full-time enrollment had ACT Composite Test Scores ranging between 19 and 22. Improving the number of students capable of maintaining a TOPS award should be a top priority to be discussed in conjunction with the development of the community college system.

OPTION 1: As Louisiana strives to distinguish the role, scope, and mission of its postsecondary education institutions and provide increased access to community colleges in all regions of the state, eligibility criteria for TOPS could be reviewed as a part of this overall restructuring.

For example, ACT scores between 20 and 22 could become a standard eligibility requirement for TOPS awards to be used at community colleges and then transferred to a four-year institution upon successful completion of the community college program.

ACT scores of 23 and above could become a standard eligibility requirement for a TOPS award to be used at a four-year institution. Such a policy is, of course, dependent on providing adequate opportunities for students to attend community colleges and, perhaps even then, only in extreme fiscal circumstances.

Description And Background: The minimal ACT score for TOPS eligibility is 20, which qualifies a student for an Opportunity award. The Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) has reported that, of the 9,638 students who failed to meet the TOPS continuation requirement of a GPA and full-time status, 61% had achieved less than a 23 on the ACT. The Board of Regents is currently developing a new master plan for higher education.

Estimated Fiscal Impact: Cannot be determined. Due to the cost differential in tuition between two and four-year institutions, savings could be realized as more students chose to attend community colleges upon graduation from high school. This may be offset by an increased number of students retaining TOPS eligibility.

Action Required To Implement: Legislation is needed to restrict TOPS eligible students having ACT scores ranging from 20 through 22 to initial attendance at the technical college or community college.

<p>FINDING: Seven high schools (four public and three private) voluntarily reported that not all TOPS required courses are being offered this academic year.</p>

OPTION 1: Extend the waiver of the TOPS required courses or offer courses through programs such as the Virtual High School program sponsored by the state Department of Education, distance learning programs and courses offered through correspondence.

Description And Background: All of the TOPS awards require a minimum of 16.5 units of high school course work constituting a core curriculum as specified in the TOPS legislation. Individual courses may be waived for students with exceptionalities or disabilities under specified circumstances.

Estimated Fiscal Impact: Extending the waiver for the 2000-01 school year would add approximately 440 awards and \$1.2 million to the cost projection for 2001-02.

Action Required To Implement: Legislation is needed to extend the waiver of required courses. The waiver should span the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years since the 2002 Regular Session would not allow the waiver to be introduced.

FINDING: General Educational Development (GED) students seeking an equivalency diploma are not eligible for a TOPS award.

OPTION 1: Provide standard eligibility requirements for students with a GED equivalency diploma to qualify for TOPS. The requirements could be at the level required for high school graduates, with exceptions for GPA and core curriculum. Or an alternate requirement could be used of an ACT score at least three points higher than the minimum ACT as is done currently for home study and students graduating from an approved out-of-state high school.

Estimated Fiscal Impact: The Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) calculated that, based on ACT information spanning 1998 to 2000, approximately 318 residents having a GED took the ACT, 46 would have had an ACT score of 23 or higher. Based on that information, OSFA estimated that 16 GED students per year could receive an award with a cost approximately \$104,000 a year after four years.

Action Required To Implement: Legislation is needed to provide for the GED TOPS award.